

WHISTLING AFTER LAVAL

Ingrid Smith

THE HOUSE IN Biloxi is mine now, tall chalk-white Queen Anne thing that it is, and my heart beats with odd trepidation, as if I were finally met in the dark with a lover long missed. It is dark inside with the sepia-toned shadows of lives, and the impulse in me is to paint it all white, or off-white, or in pastels of peach-white, or mint-white, and leave ghosts no corners to fold into.

One Twenty-Three Lillian Street sits imperial on its green lot facing toward the Gulf, which is six blocks away but not visible through the trees. Summers, I came here to visit. I remember the heat, the benign desperation that characterized these near yet distant relatives. If I bring wicker in, and central air, if I curtain the rooms in bouffant polished cotton and varnish the floors till they are wooden mirrors, I can banish that heat and that desperate longing. Perhaps some rattan—though the wicker adds lightness. Perhaps some pale tiles, some brass accents. Benign ghosts are ghosts, nonetheless, and perhaps will be charmed away by such decor.

The last summer I spent here went on with a soft, wanton vengeance, and so did the war. Gnats fat as pebbles swarmed everywhere all day, and wispy bloodsucking mosquitoes, and green iridescent mosquito hawks, who never caught anything we could see.

The cook sweated about in the kitchen of Grandpere's house wiping her brow on the wrist-length white sleeves of the uniform Grandpere insisted she wear, mumbling under her breath about what Mr. Sheridan must be up to about now, dodging bullets as thick in the air as our gnats and bloodsuckers. I sat with my fan from the funeral home feeling grateful I could not sweat blood like the rosy-cheeked Jesus in the Garden who adorned the technicolor front of the fan.

I watched Azarene wipe her forehead again. It amazed me that the wonderful chocolate-brown of her skin did not wipe off with the sweat, but I did not mention that. Once I had told Tante Laurette, and

she had laughed in that arch, brittle way that she always had and gone off and told someone as if it were a cruel joke. I felt sucked into her marbleheart spite, tainted.

Azarene and I sweated. Laurette slept so she would be up for the evening, her beauty sleep, she said. I told Azarene I did not see that it had done any good yet, though of course everyone considered Laurette a great beauty. ("Absolutely *embalmed* with *Toujours Moi*," said Laval, in our sharing of whispers. "Of *course* she stays young!") Grandpere was off in the Lincoln somewhere doing business. And Sheridan was off in Korea, in places with damn-fool names, as Grandpere said, dodging the bullets of Communists.

No one knew where Laval was, that day. He disappeared like morning mist when he wanted to. Perhaps he was off to downtown Biloxi to buy some more shirts—that boy loved his shirts, daffodil seersucker, elegant white-on-white striped, or what have you—or just down the road to his friend Carlton Janes' to play bourree and drink seven-and-sevens all afternoon. We would see Laval just before five, when he would come home and switch on the TV.

Laval and I would sit and watch Liberace—Laval entranced, I amused in my superior ten-year-old way—and then Laval and I would play duets on the dark heavy upright that sat in the parlor. Laval would sing, in his wonderful falsetto, "I'm only a bird in a gilded cage." And we would talk about gildedness—cumulus clouds on a picture-book's ceiling in Austria, touched with gold, Chinese furniture we had seen at a great-aunt's in Pass Christian, birthday cards with gold edges and satin puffed hearts inset, smelling like essence of roses.

Laval had the secret of life in those days. I knew that; Azarene said it; Laval made it plain. He breathed confidence, a sense of beauty and gentleness, things I could not put my finger on. The white-on-white stripes of his shirt were the staff of a music we almost could hear. Then again, Laval carried a darkness with him, or a deep pain. For someone so young—he was nineteen—he seemed to have lived lives beyond us all. Azarene said that one afternoon, pouring the brown-sugar filling into the crust for pecan pie, and I had to agree. I was ten, he was nineteen, we were cousins, and that nine-year span was an abyss that only our afternoon duets could bridge.

"He is an odd one, that Mr. Laval," Azarene said. "Not like Mr. Sheridan. No ma'am. An odd one." But she smiled as she said it, with great delight. We were odd, she and I, we conceded. So Laval could be odd, too.

Sheridan sent me dolls from Japan, dolls with matte-china pale faces and hair stiff and black as a horse's. Their stands held them upright on my guest-room bureau and their bright brocade dresses

reflected back from its broad glass. Sheridan sent a jacket embroidered with fire-breathing dragons. I hung it in the chifforobe and left the door slightly open so that I could catch a glimpse of the emerald satin whenever I liked. I had not worn it yet because Sheridan had sent it only this spring. I would take it back to New Orleans in the fall when I went home. I would wear it, walking to school under the row of imperial live oaks that lined the Avenue, and I would be the cynosure of all eyes, a green comet flying low. I longed for the coming of fall.

Here, I had nothing to do in the daytime. I watched Azarene and spoke self-conscious wisdom with her in the kitchen. I walked to the little store across the green field and down Crawford Lane and came back with Archie and Veronica comics. I traced the shapes of Veronica and Betty's breasts, and drew dresses for them on onionskin paper, with built-in bosom bulges. I drew cotillion gowns, trying to replicate the look of tarleton and taffeta and chantilly lace, failing utterly. My colored pencils made thready pale green or pale coral or whatever color, and that was it. Detail beyond that was all in my mind.

I was drawing one afternoon at the dining room table. Dust motes danced in old yellow sunlight that grazed through the curtains. Azarene was out back, on the edge of the porch, with her shiny brown legs hanging over the garden. She swung her legs as if she were dreaming, as if she were twenty or thirty years younger. The kitchen was filled with the onion and garlic and smoke-sausage smells of the red beans. It had to be Monday. I sat with my Archie books, tracing Veronica's buxomness into a white wedding gown. I envisioned seed pearls and fine lace, but what I drew resembled small warts and mere scribbles.

I hated this all-too-apparent discrepancy between the dream and the penciled reality. There was a pretense that I was here to have a good time, to spend summer happily, loved, in the lap of the relatives. But the truth was that Grandpere was off making his money, buying and selling commodities, whatever they were. And Grandmere—had my mother forgotten?—was dead for two years now, her pink silky night-things languishing in the sachet-scented drawers, her stiff-starched doilies drooping slightly on the living-room end tables. Laurette should have been dead. I could see no use for her. I wished that Laval would come home from wherever he was.

And, voila, he was there. He breathed sweet breath of his card-playing seven-and-sevens. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Eh, cher?" he said. "You marrying off Veronica now, cher?"

I was happy. I felt tears well up in my eyes. I had not thought that I was so lonely. Laval's face was smooth as a baby's. He shaved, but not

much. I wondered why men needed whiskers.

"No," I said. "Only drawing."

"Papa wants to marry me off, too," he said, rueful. "Wants me to take up the business and raise up a bevy of brats."

"Brats," I said. "Hmph." It was clear that I felt he included me under that rubric.

"Not you, cher," he said. He winked. His smooth cheek wrinkled reassuringly at me. "Mais, Laval is nineteen and not at college, so Papa thinks that he ought to get married."

"Then go off to college," I said, sensibly. I was not fond of the idea of anyone's marrying Laval.

"And what would I study? Accounting and all that damn merde? That is all that there is, in Papa's mind. You think he would want me to study art? Learn about music?" He made a spitting sound. "Who would want to go away to learn bookkeeping?" He made it sound like morticians' school.

"Then go off to college and play bourree," I said. "Some people do that. I have second cousins in New Orleans who do that. Go to cotillions and play bourree, but they say they are going to college."

"Papa has eyes like the hawk's," Laval said.

"Does he love you?" I said. Grandpere was opaque as ice. I had no real idea whether he loved anyone. He treated me civilly, but Azarene gave me more love than Grandpere, or his daughter, my mother, who wanted me here for the summer so that she could pursue and be pursued, so she could look for a second husband with more money than her first had had. My father had been as civil as Grandpere, but had gone away. Grandpere was in complicity with my mother, I was certain. When she remarried, he would no longer have to send her checks for my tuition or my dance-revue costumes or for the enormous chrome bumper on our sky-blue Buick which shattered when she hit the rear of a Holsum delivery truck.

"Papa?" Laval said. There was a vast silence, and he sighed into it. I held my pencil in mid-air and looked through the open door out to the porch where Azarene sat, smoking still, swinging her leg. "Papa loved Mama, and Mama loved Sheridan. Mama's gone, Sheridan's gone, for the time, and Papa can't think who is this boy in his place."

"Me, too," I said. I meant I felt the same. Mother loved Daddy and Daddy had gone to the woman in Baton Rouge. So I was here.

Laval made a sidewise smile. I made one back.

Azarene got up from the edge of the porch and sauntered inside. I thought she must have been beautiful when she was young. I thought further that Laval ought to marry her, or me, but no one else in the world.

"Marry Azarene," I said. "I will draw her a dress. Ivory lace on her beautiful beautiful brown skin. And I will be your kid, and people will ask y'all if I am adopted, and y'all will say Certainly not. And Grandpere will inherit you the house, and the cream-colored convertible he has got stored in the old garage, and I will wax it myself, with my old pj's I will not have to wear anymore, and we will go riding on Sunday afternoons when everyone else is bored. I will eat Mint Bubles in the back seat, with the top down, and lick my fingers all I want, and get stuck to the funny papers if I feel like it."

Laval hugged me. My arms felt cushy inside his sinewy embrace.

"What you all talking about thère, so sneaky?" said Azarene.

"Nothing," I said.

"Anything we want," Laval said. "What you think, you the FBI?"

Azarene laughed from deep down. "If I was I would put you in jail both, and throw them keys so far."

"And then?" he said.

"And then I would lock up you papa in a gypsy wagon and send him around the world. But slow. And then I would go down to the cemetery and make my apologize to you mama, but she understand. And then I would move in my people to this house, and bounce on them mattress and drink from them crystal cup in the sideboard. Is what I would do," she concluded.

"And hire Liberace to play at the takeover, hey?" said Laval.

"Liberace?" she scoffed.

"Then who?" I said. This was wonderful fantasy. I was enjoying the sight of Grandpere disappearing over the horizon in the gypsy wagon, which was as gilded as Austrian ceilings and Chinese chairs we had invented.

"No fairies," said Azarene. "I would have the gospel choir from the Church of the Radiant Holiness, over Mobile, with they rosy-brown robes and they collars as white as wings. That is who."

In the driveway we heard Grandpere's car. Something died in us. We sighed in unison. Azarene turned to go into the kitchen.

"He wants me to marry Miss Caroline," Laval said.

"She has an excellent bustline," I said.

"An excellent bustline," Laval echoed. He seemed amazed.

"Yes," I said, somewhat defensive. Perhaps I should not have pointed it out to him. Perhaps he would wait till I grew, and would marry me instead.

"An excellent bustline," he said again. "I have to tell Carlton Janes." He always said Carlton Janes, as if there were more than one Carlton. "Carlton Janes will love that."

"Mr. Carlton do love the womens," said Azarene.

"That is not what I mean," Laval said. "He would take some delight in the phrase."

"In the phrase. In the phrase," Azarene mumbled, wandering toward the kitchen, her head weaving side to side slowly, like seaweed.

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Midnights I sat up reading so that I could sleep through the morning. I loved the cool nights, with the moths beating against the screens and the dark liquid light from the guest room lamp spilling across my late pages.

My room was at the back of the house, upstairs, looking out onto the grass of the yard and the pea-vines that climbed the strung twine and the dirt-covered side street, Saville Way, its name elegant as the contents of Grandmere's deep closet.

In the dusty book I read, a girl crossed the ocean to France and wore jewels in gaslit salons. A horse so black it was blue ran through a lightning-lit storm, throwing the puddles that mirrored the dark sky every which way. I put the book aside and walked out into the hall.

The door to the back upstairs gallery was open. The night was bright, lit by a full moon. Its light shone back off the green leaves of the vines. Its light seemed to emanate from the white trumpets of flowers that climbed the chickenwire fence along the street.

I listened to the night. There was a radio somewhere down Saville Way, old melodrama with organ chords, the sort of thing we did not listen to anymore here at the Levasseurs since we had the new Muntz console TV Laval had bought. There were crickets, in a constant hum overlapping another constant hum. There were dogs in the distance, and the sound of automobiles in the other direction, down toward the beach, then the sound of the Gulf water, distant and moaning against the shore. Nothing moved in my field of vision. I was queen of the night here on my high back balcony, empress of Saville, and of all this immobile, meshed sound. I heard, or rather felt, a screen door slam lightly.

Then, suddenly, in the corner of my eye, a white shape made whiter by moonlight moved away from the house. I squinted. It moved slowly and my eyes focused. It was a man, wearing a sleeved undershirt and white boxer shorts with broad ballooning legs. The man was thin and walked like a ghost, like a dream. He was sleepwalking. It was Laval. His thin legs, like the clappers of foolish bells, looked milk-white, cadaverous.

He had not taken five ghostly steps before I heard a sound behind me in the hall. It was Grandpere.

"Move, child," he said. He seemed to need to stand in the exact spot

where I was standing. I stepped to the side. I could not pass him to return to my room. That did not matter. I was transfixed.

Laval continued down Saville, past the pea-vines, past the white luminous trumpets, as unwavering as a small boat on a still midnight pond.

"Hush, child," Grandpere said. I had not said anything.

Laval floated past the green leaves and the flowers of light. He was past the shed now.

Suddenly a shrill note split the air. Grandpere's lips were pursed. The first notes of the Marseillaise leapt from our perch and flowed on one long sweep of air to Laval. He turned as if on command and aimed his walking dream toward the back door. Past the shingled shed, silver with moonlight, past vines and past flowers. Grandpere stopped short only a few measures into the song, as if this were a long-familiar signal, but Laval kept coming. He disappeared under the ledge of the gallery, moonlight shining on his Brylcreemed hair, and we heard the door squeak open then shut.

Grandpere seemed to have forgotten my presence. "Laval, Laval," he said softly. Then he seemed to remember me. "Child," he said. "You must say nothing to Laval."

"Yes, Grandpere," I said.

"One must not wake a somnambulist," Grandpere said.

"Yes," I said.

"Talking about it is just as bad," Grandpere said. "One must not talk to Laval about it afterward. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Grandpere," I said. "I understand."

I did and I did not. I had heard that waking a sleepwalker might kill him, might stop his beating heart, might send his blood rushing in pyrotechnic paroxysms to his brain and cause a fatal quake there. But I did not understand why I must not talk about it afterward to Laval. It would be a great subject for talk.

"Or to anyone else," Grandpere said. "To the colored girl."

"Girl?" I said. Grandpere did not let me play with the black girls who walked past our house, who lived only a block away but might as well have lived on some far planet. How would I tell them?

"Azarene," he said, somewhat impatient.

"Yes, Grandpere," I said. I began to understand. To discuss Laval's midnight weakness with someone was a kind of killing. If it were true, as some said, that the soul left the body at night and that to wake a sleepwalker would trap the soul in the air, then perhaps to discuss a sleepwalker's excursions would be to foredoom his next time. Or something. If I talked about what I had seen, I would give Azarene access to Laval's secret, and shame him, and in the bargain bring a

curse upon him.

Grandpere turned and walked down the dark of the hall to his bedroom, but not before I had seen something much like a tear in his eye. I waited until he had closed his bedroom door, slowly and heavily, then went inside myself. On the wall at the back of the hall were old family pictures in dark frames. Laurette in long blonde ringlets, wearing the narcissist's face that she must have been born with, and sitting on a rug on a studio table. My mother at her wedding, with my sleek and civil father. Sheridan in knickers and showing off a shiny bicycle. Laval astride a dark pony, in a picture taken by an itinerant front-yard photographer. I imagined Grandmere looking on as the picture was taken, Grandpere as he hung the framed photo some time later, still young, this young son his pride quite as much as the bicycling Sheridan, but never showing that love and that pride to Laval.

I climbed back into my bed. The sheets smelled of Azarene's ironing. My book's night in France was filled with intrigue, and bright conversation, and wine the color of my garnet birthstone, but I was a ten-year-old girl and slept deeply.

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August came on like the breath of a giant dog, hot, damp, and indisputably natural. Grandpere ignored nature and wore his suits every day, dark stripes with shiny dark ties. Laval dressed in Bermuda shorts and his pastel nylon seersucker shirts. I wore nothing but my swimsuit from the moment Grandpere left in the mornings until the time he might conceivably reappear. Azarene sweated in her uniform.

Liberace played "Summertime . . . and the living is easy."

"Boo hiss," said Laval.

I went to the refrigerator and got another ice cube to suck on. Laval and Azarene drank iced tea.

Liberace played "In the cool cool cool of the evening."

"Boo double hiss," Laval said.

"If Grandpere is so rich, why don't you all have air condition?" I said.

"Honey," said Azarene. "That is why Mr. Leon is rich."

"Cause he doesn't have air condition?" I said.

"Cause he don't spend his money," said Azarene.

"Storing up treasures," said Laval, his eyes rolling mightily. "Where moth and rust consume."

"You be glad that you daddy can't hear," said Azarene.

"Never matter," said Laval. "I was never on his hit parade. There is Sheridan, Mama, Laurette, and Isolde, then commodities. I am not

even in the top ten.”

Azarene looked at Laval with a jewelily, quizzical eye. “I would say you are probable right, Mr. Laval. But how can you just say it so cool?”

I wanted to say that he could be wrong. But to reveal even that would be to endanger my secret, to betray the look in Grandpere’s eyes the night I first watched Laval walk.

“I am cool,” Laval said. “I am seersucker-soul himself.”

Azarene laughed and threw the tails of a handful of scallions at him.

We had a letter from Sheridan that week. He described some shooting he had been involved in as if it were all a stage-play. He told of the odd puffy dresses the Korean girls wore, and of how expressive their dark eyes were.

Laval and I opened the mail when it came.

“Ooh,” Laval said. “We had better not show this to Papa. He would not care to hear of Sheridan dating the ladies there.”

“He never said he was dating the ladies,” I said.

“It is understood,” Laval said, as if imparting to me some sophistication for which I should be duly grateful.

“Grandpere wants *you* to go out on dates,” I said. “But doesn’t want Sheridan to? But he’s older.”

“Not Korean girls,” Laval said. “Sheridan played football for Biloxi High School. You wouldn’t remember that.”

“So?” I said.

“Sheridan does not have to prove himself,” Laval said. “I do. All Sheridan has to do is provide heirs. And not slanty-eyed little Chop Chop Levasseur Juniors. Papa would be oo-la-la incredulous at the thought. We won’t show him the letter.”

And so we did not. As it turned out, we never did.

The following week we heard Sheridan had been killed. The best we could calculate, he had been killed just before Liberace’s show, Thursday afternoon, when Laval was just coming back up Saville Way from Carlton Janes’, and I was stuffing big purple-black eggplants with breadcrumbs and shrimp to help Azarene out. We had had no idea. We sang along with Liberace: “I want to ride to the ridge where the West commences, gaze at the moon until I lose my senses.”

“Not Mr. Sheridan,” Azarene said. “So much life in him.”

“What a thing to say,” Laval said. There was something between them, a stillness, a humor, not anger. “How much life does anybody have? So much life, my foot. No life, anymore.” He was almost incoherent.

“You right. That stupid. What you going to say when somebody die,” Azarene said.

He had been blown to bits. It was not a stage play. There was

nothing left of him to come home.

"What was that song?" Laval said. "Don't Fence Me In?" We sang it again.

Grandpere sat in the living room until it was quite dark drinking port wine. He talked to none of us.

Laval tiptoed past him in the half-lit hall, ostentatiously, farcically, bringing broad wedges of Azarene's custard pie upstairs for us to share. Azarene had been sent home early. Dinnertime had passed unnoticed. I laughed at Laval from the top of the stairs. I wondered if I were blaspheming.

"Oh, Sheridan won't mind," Laval said. "He surely has gone to heaven. He was a good boy. And I am certain that heaven has custard pie." He sank his teeth into the point of his pie and then, chewing, leaned back and admired his teeth-marks. His eyes were wet.

"Did you and Sheridan fight?" I said.

"Hell yes," said Laval. "What are brothers for?"

"I don't know," I said.

He bit again and mused on the scallops his front teeth had cut in the custard. "Papa loved him," he said. He was talking through his pie. "Excuse me," he said, and he turned and went up to his room.

I read late. I had finished the France book and found one about a charming invalid girl at a spa in the Virginia mountains. I was sure she would be cured by the end of the book. I had read *Heidi* long ago, and always expected the righting of Nature's inequities. Laurette had not yet come in. She had gone to Mobile with some lawyer from Jackson the afternoon before and was not back yet. Sheridan was not dead yet, for her. I wondered if she would care.

I sat up reading under my bedlamp. The air was quite still and the moths pushed against the screen. Someone's cat yowled. There was no other sound. Down the hall, I heard a door open. Grandpere had gone to bed two hours earlier, staggering under his burden of port wine. I went to my door and peered out.

It was not Grandpere. It was Laval. He was sleepwalking again. In the moonlight in the hall his face frightened me. It was white, stiff with repose and suffused with the stuff of dream and nightmare.

I started to speak out his name: Laval. But I remembered. His soul was at large, or the blood would rush somewhere it ought not to be and kill him on the spot. So I stood watching as he turned and headed for the stairs. Grandpere would wake when he heard the screen door, and Laval would be called back. I had best stay out of the way.

I sat lightly on the edge of my bed and tried to read. Instead, I sat staring at an idealized watercolor of the velvet-green hills that surrounded the spa where this miracle cure would take place. I heard

Laval's step on the stairs.

Soft creak, soft creak. Thirteen creaks. He was downstairs, and rounding the banister. Grandpere would catch him.

And then I heard Grandpere's snore. Grandpere did not usually snore. It was the port wine, and he would not hear Laval go out the screen door. Laval could keep going forever, and Grandpere would never know. Laval would keep going, inland and inland, and be awakened by someone he did not know. In the next state, perhaps. I was trying to think what was north of us.

Then I ran. Down the stairs, through the dining room door.

The dining room table was broad as an ice rink, night-dark waxed mahogany. Sonja Henie might have skated there, deep nights while we all slept. There were fourteen chairs.

Laval navigated it all with ease. His back was straight, his thin shoulders like hangers in his short-sleeved undershirt. I wanted to call him. I watched him go through the kitchen, past the table where he had cut custard pie and left crumbs. Azarene would raise Cain in the morning.

I ran upstairs and out onto the back gallery. Laval was passing the peas and the trumpet-vines. He was passing the shed.

I licked my lips and assayed the arpeggio. All the flags of France waved in my whistling. Laval heard and turned. Four measures, and I brought him back. Small hairs stood up on my neck. Such strange power to have over someone, and him full-grown.

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It was not two days after we had heard of Sheridan's death that Miss Caroline called and asked Laval over for dinner. Laval made his face hard, as if he were a prisoner being offered his last meal, and said certainly he would come. I heard him announcing it to Grandpere that evening.

"Well," Grandpere said. "I am glad you have finally come to your senses."

I could not see Laval's face. I was sure it was the telephone face, the last-meal face. I asked him later why he would bother with Miss Caroline.

"Bother," he echoed. He did not answer me.

I went out to the kitchen.

"Laval is going to go to that horrible girl's house for dinner," I said.

"Pass me that bell pepper," Azarene said. "By you elbow."

"To Miss Caroline's," I said. "I hate her nail polish."

"I said pass that bell pepper," Azarene said. She was sliding diamond-chip sized pieces of onion around on the chopping board

with the sharp edge of the cleaver.

I looked around for the bell pepper. "And I cannot see why she would ask Laval, anyway."

"Lord," Azarene said. She reached across the table and pulled the contorted green pepper toward her. She sliced into it. "Miss Caroline don't have the brains of a fish. She just got dollar sign in her eyeballs."

"But Laval's smart," I said. It sounded defensive.

"Yes ma'am," Azarene said. "You don't worry bout him. He mought go visit just to please old Mr. Leon, but she ain't gone catch him, no sir and no ma'am. Get that chair, child, and climb up and get the cayenne."

* * *

Laval went to Korea the week after I left for home. I was glad I did not have to see him go, watch him packing up his bag with razor blades and Aqua Velva.

I wore my dragon-backed jacket that Sheridan had sent as I walked to school, even before it was cool enough. Girls were snide and mocked me to hide their yellow envy. Boys threw acorns. I was the belle of the ball.

Laval did not even write. He did not have to. Anything we could say could wait till he came home. I did not want polite trivialities. Letters were useless.

My mother was dating a man who she told me was heir to the Murphy's Oil Soap fortune. He wore an onyx ring set with three diamonds. He went to a manicurist and wore flawless clear nail polish. He had thick lips I would recognize in Elvis Presley's, when he came to prominence. I detested the Oil Soap man.

At Christmas we went to Grandpere's. Tante Laurette was everywhere.

She was engaged again, to a friend of the lawyer from Jackson.

Azarene grumbled. "Mr. Leon expect me to turn everything into Christmas. It seventy-eight outside and he be wanting me to make it snow, jingle bell, everything. I don't know what he be thinking."

"How many times has Tante Laurette been engaged?" I said.

Azarene looked at the ceiling and ticked silent names or epithets off her fingers. "I believe they be four."

"Dashing through the snow," I sang, unthinking.

"You want do that stuff, you go outside." She pointed with a spoon. "You go way past the shed and you keep on. Where Azarene can't hear you."

I thought of Laval. "If I could have, I would have sent Laval a white coat for Christmas. White wool. I bet he would wear it. Korea is cold,

you know.”

“Jingle bell,” Azarene said disgustedly. “Eighteen-pound turkey and who gone to eat it. Miz Laurette and you mama they eat like a parakeet do. That fine Jackson man with them spectator shoes come, I will leave for sure. That man the worst yet. Got a face like a heart like the root of some tree. Knotted up. You and Mr. Leon and that fiance got to eat the whole turkey?”

“Why did Laval go to the war?” I said.

“Honey, you have to ask that?” Azarene said. “My boy done gone too and I don’t like to think about that.”

“Do you know? Why he went?” I persisted.

“It Miss Caroline, Mr. Leon, and that Mr. Sheridan dead in the grave—oh Lord, did I say that, and him scatter—put together made Mr. Laval go.”

I waited for her to say more.

“You know Miss Caroline. Why. He went to get far, far away. Mr. Leon be pressing on him to go marry her. Then Mr. Leon be wanting him to go be in Mr. Sheridan’s place, or what. I hear them arguing. Mr. Leon say You don’t want marry Caroline, you rather play cards with Carlton Janes, what be the matter with you, kissy-kissy with Carlton Janes, you got no balls at all?”

I remembered how Grandpere had cried watching Laval at his sleepwalking. Dear baby boy, said his eyes. Sheridan, then Laurette, then Isolde, then Laval, baby boy.

“This some Christmas,” Azarene said. “Mr. Sheridan die, then Mr. Laval go, then Miz Laurette bring home this warthog from Jackson, and you mama all depress because the Oil Soap man find somebody else. This some Christmas.”

In February I left my emerald-green jacket with dragons in a seat on the Saint Charles streetcar. I realized it as soon as I stepped to the sidewalk and shouted but the streetcar just pulled away, clanging. We phoned the car barn but no one turned it in.

The next week we heard about Laval. He had gotten the flu in Korea, and then meningitis, and died. The body was shipped home. My mother said Grandpere did not want a funeral, but I found out afterward there was a funeral and we had simply not gone. My mother had a date with her new beau, a perfume wholesaler.

April first Grandpere dropped dead of a stroke, sixty-one years old. He was buried between Grandmere and Laval. We went to that funeral. I watched my mother making eyes at the perfumer as they lowered Grandpere’s coffin.

Back at the house, she and Laurette wrangled over the furniture.

“Don’t want to wait for the will,” Azarene said, watching covertly

through the archway from the dining room. She shook her head and continued ironing curtains. I wondered why she was doing that, why we would need fresh-ironed curtains now. Who would she work for now, with Grandpere gone?

Laurette insisted that the furniture from Grandmere and Grandpere's bedroom was hers. My mother wanted it. The china cabinet in the front foyer with all the St. Louis World Exposition souvenirs had been Grandmere's. My mother wanted that. "You'll get the house," she said. "You know that. Must you have everything?" Laurette shrieked and wrestled the cabinet key into its lock, insisting that seven or eight things in there were hers, no matter what my mother said. The claw-footed thing wobbled side to side.

Azarene shook her head. "They break that curve glass on the front of that thing, they gone to stop then, maybe. You just go down to the beach, honey child. Put you sweater, it chilly. Go watch them wave hit for a while, then come back. These two gone to get tired of it."

My mother's perfumer and Laurette's warthog had gone off for some whiskey, ostensibly so Azarene could make sauce for the bread pudding.

They would come back with two fifths, and the four of them would drink it all. Or my mother and Tante Laurette would rip the legs off Grandmere's walnut dressing table, fighting over it. I could not see a good end to the day. So I went for my sweater.

Upstairs in the hall Laval's picture hung in its accustomed place. I went to the end of the hall, looked out the door down Saville Way, and whistled the opening phrase from the French anthem. Laval did not come back. I took down his picture from the wall to look into the little-boy eyes. I walked in to the bedroom where my sweater lay on the bed. I opened my little suitcase and laid Laval's picture there, between the two extra dresses my mother insisted I bring. I went out to the hall again and, one by one, I took all the pictures down, stacking them on the hall table. By the time anyone noticed their absence, there would be too much going on to worry about re-hanging them for a while. It would be weeks or months before they knew that Laval was gone, riding the front-yard photographer's pony.

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Laurette married the warthog, who proceeded to become mayor of some little town outside Jackson. We saw her occasionally, far too often for my tastes, but my mother said that we had to keep in contact. We were all that each other had, she and Laurette, she and I.

Time telescopes easily from this distance. Laurette died when I was a freshman sorority pledge at Sophie Newcomb. She had breast

cancer. I decided that I had no heart, or that it pumped ice water, because all I felt was a numb concern for myself. I crossed my hands over my bosom and resolved to borrow someone's genetics textbook. I would see if the gene could jump sideways. I heard the relief in my own breath as I realized we would not have to take those trips north anymore. I was still all my mother had, and she insisted I come along.

The perfumer became a bore. So she took a new, more outgoing approach to the game. She did not have to put up with bores. She took up with a widower who owned a boat dealership. It worked out. She married him. One Twenty-Three Lillian became her house now, and she and the boat dealer lived here for ten years, till he died, and then twenty-one more, till she died, just last Thursday.

* * *

The house needs some work. I will call in the college-boy carpenters I got to work on our house on the Parkway. The three of them have degrees in useless pursuits like English literature and geography, and they do wonderful detailing. They made the oak of our back parlor mantel just come alive: dentils, lion's mouth, all of it.

But once I have got the house done, when will I get away to come over here? Weekends, my husband has this and that. Tulane games, business trips, forays across the lake to see his old mother, who lives outside Mandeville and makes me happy. They are a family fraught with felicity. My sons swim on their high-school teams and bring home medals. I do watercolors and have had a number of shows. We are fine.

I will see Azarene this evening. My rough calculation tells me she is seventy-four or so, having been far younger than I imagined when she and Laval and I lived among scallions and peppers and made mouths behind Laurette's back. She still lives, I hear, out where she used to, with her son who survived Korea. I will ask her if she would like to come here and be my permanent housesitter. Bounce on them mattress. We can decide whether we will come over when summer comes.

Underneath my feet now, the old wood of the gallery floor creaks and groans. Down Saville Way, it looks much the same. It is too early in the year for the vines to be quite full, but they still climb the rusted wire fence. Looking around me to be sure my husband and sons are not within earshot, I whistle the eight bars of deathless French pride. Laval's ghost does not heed me, but marches on, past the shed, past all the houses, across mountains, over the ocean floor. He will not turn back.